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Julian Millie

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strophes (p. 3), and in particular to the last verse of the first strophe, and the last two verses at the end of this poem he wrote in 2008 (English version by the reviewer):

***Dendam Sejarah***

*Tak usah kaubelah hatiku  
 Karena telah kukatakan sendiri  
 Ini dendam yang belum terbalas  
 Aku bahagia dan tenang bersamanya  
 Kan kubawa hingga jasad ini menjadi tanah.  
 (.....)  
 Dendam adalah kekuatan dan cinta  
 Dendam adalah solidaritas dan masa depan  
 Dendam adalah naluri persaudaraan yang berbinar  
 Dendam adalah mahkamah pengadilan dosa  
  
 Aku merasa hidup  
 Karena aku mengemban dendam.*

***Everlasting fostering of revenge***

*No need to scrutinize my heart  
 Because I told myself already  
 This revenge is not yet repaid  
 I am pleased and restful  
 To carry it on till my body will be dust  
 (.....)  
 Revenge is strength and love  
 Revenge is solidarity and future  
 Revenge is the instinct of sparkling brotherhood  
 Revenge is the last judgment of sin  
  
 I feel alive  
 Because I foster revenge.*

Nico Schulte Nordholt  
 Indonesianist

Ajip Rosidi, *Surat-surat ti Jepang* (Letters from Japan, volumes 1-4), chosen by Usep Romli. Bandung: Kiblat, 2017, 577 p. ISBN: 978-979-8004-04-9, 978-979-8004-08-7, 978-979-8004-09-4, 978-979-8004-10-9.

Over the course of his brilliant career Ajip Rosidi (b. 1938) has worn many hats: poet, playwright, novelist, researcher, translator, journalist, ethnomusicologist, biographer, publisher, editor and cultural bureaucrat. If I were to reduce these many activities to a single, over-arching program, his contribution might best be summarised as follows: quite early in his career he

realised that contemporary nations rely for their distinctiveness on – amongst other things – patrimonies that materialise in writing and publication. In order to gain recognition as ‘authentic nations’, it is important that populations be able to point to national writing traditions, and this requires documentation of genres (not only written ones, but also oral ones) as well as related activities such as criticism and translation. He also realised that the political and material conditions of Indonesian modernity would not greatly assist subjects of regional cultures to undertake such processes. Ajip’s career has been dedicated obsessively to these activities. He has created a massive body of *meta*-culture about Sundanese writing and tradition. His work has not only revealed the richness and diversity of Sundanese lifeways: it has also materialised them in forms that have enabled the Sundanese patrimony to stand distinct beside those of Indonesia and those of other ethnic groups.

The letters collected here, all of them written in Sundanese between 1980 and 1983 while Rosidi was teaching Indonesian in Japan, enable us to see the enormous task of brokerage involved in this achievement. This task is obscured when one reads individual works from his *oeuvre*, but the 180 letters collected here reveal him as an inveterate broker:<sup>9</sup> he contacts Sundanese authors in order to urge them to write their memoirs; he advises publishers about their publication lists; he arranges the financing of publication projects; he asks colleagues to send him photocopies of articles and books needed for his own work; he advocates for the publication of his own works and the works of others; he provides critiques and evaluations of other people’s work; he edits the works of favourite authors; he sources Japanese funding for Sundanese cultural groups to visit Japan; he advocates ideas for new formats for publication and performance based on Japanese models, and so on. So intense is his devotion to these things that very few of these letters can be regarded as purely personal. Most of them are related to the business of cultural production.

And of the authors he promotes in these letters, none receives more attention than Ajip Rosidi. Rosidi’s strategies for having his own writing published might be good examples for all writers: do not avoid self-promotion, and do not overlook the potential of *all* your writing to be published... and then republished! The circumstances behind the publication of these letters illustrate these dictums: we should not think Rosidi wrote these letters while thinking solely about communicating with his addressee, for he typed every letter with a page of carbon paper underneath, producing a copy that could be kept for later publication. No wonder that he has become – by far – the most prolific Indonesian writer.

9. In fact, before writing these letters, Rosidi held a formal role as cultural broker through his membership of the Jakarta Arts Council (DKJ). Rosidi left Indonesia for Japan after a painful power struggle led to his resignation from the Council (see Hill 2010).

This strategy might be a good example for writers, but it also has a less than positive result: Rosidi wrote every letter in this collection – how much more beneficial would this volume be if correspondence *from* his interlocutors were included? His correspondents include many of the key figures of the Sundanese patrimony: the writers Caraka and Ki Umbara; politicians Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, Ali Sadikin and Enkin Muttaqien; Sundanese nationalist scholars and journalists such as Abdullah Mustapa and Edi Ekadjati; Islamic creatives such as Yosef C.D. and Endang Saefuddin Anshary. All these figures appear here only as second person addressees of Ajip Rosidi. No doubt it would be a difficult task to obtain permission for publication of the ‘incoming’ correspondence, but this is common practice in publication projects of this kind.

None of what I have just written means that Rosidi’s sole concern has been self-promotion. His promotion of and assistance for other authors are legendary, and many examples of these are revealed in these letters. The greatest example of his bigheartedness emerged after these letters were written: the prizes he has established for writers publishing in the regional languages of Indonesia. In 1989 he began to offer – at his own expense – an annual prize for a literary work in Sundanese. The prize was labelled the *Rancagé* (Sundanese: creative) prize. Following his lead, a donor provided funds for an annual prize for services to Sundanese literature. In 1994 the same two awards commenced to be offered for writers in Javanese, and in 1998, Balinese was added. In 2008, a prize for writers in the language of Lampung was added, then Batak, then Banjar. These prizes, with their flow-on effects in public discourse beyond the benefits for the writers who receive them, are clear examples of Rosidi’s independent vision, his ‘can-do’ attitude, and his concern for the public good.

The letters, beautifully edited by Usep Romli, provide a window into a regional cultural network that is not well understood outside its immediate setting. The contemporary cultural sphere in Indonesia is badly polarised between liberal and Islamic conservative poles. Rosidi and a number of his colleagues have resisted this simplified dichotomy. He was dedicated to literary genres such as the novel and lyric, and for this reason he comes across in many of these letters as a bona fide liberal in the modernist mould. He reveals a conviction that these genres were the products of individual, critical minds, and were vehicles for ‘substantial content’ (*anu eusian*) that could attain the status of ‘great works’ (*karya badag*). But at the same time, his liberalism is also characterised by the Islamic outlook that is common in Sundanese intellectuals: Islam provides a buffer or middle way that enables Muslims to avoid the spectres of communism and unbridled capitalism. In his choice of subjects for biographies, Rosidi chose figures that represented this Islamic outlook. He has written two biographies of Islamic figures, Moh. Natsir (1908-1993) and Sjafruddin Prawiranegara (1911-1989). Both

these figures were committed to Islam as a normative basis for a modernist Indonesian politics and social life. Rosidi invested heavily in these figures as exemplary leaders for a modern Indonesia.

This particular strand of liberalism reminds us of the political project of the Masjumi party, which attained great popularity in West Java, particularly in the 1955 elections. In fact, there might be good reasons for categorising Rosidi as a cultural producer in the Masjumi mould, after all, the peak success of that party coincided with the early part of his career, and he has been the most important biographer of the movement (the two figures just mentioned were key Masjumi figures).

In reality, however, it is inaccurate to categorise Rosidi as an Islamic writer, for two reasons. The first is his faith in the public value of the 'higher genres' of writing, which puts him at a distance from Masjumi's political template. His high evaluation of the novel, the lyric, modern theatre and other genres is rooted in the belief that these genres enable capable individuals to express themselves in a way that enables critical perspectives on life and society. One could conclude that in Rosidi's worldview, a good society is one in which these genres enable citizens to engage in processes of reflection and critique.

This strong conviction about the public value of the 'higher' genres has been instrumental in Rosidi's work. The production of the Prawiranegara biography is a striking example. Rosidi had become attracted to 'Pak Sjaf' for the latter's determination to interpret Islam in the light of contemporary intellectual developments, and started to act as broker for the production of his biography around 1980 (it was eventually published – after two writers had commenced the task – under Rosidi's authorship in 1986). At the beginning of the process, Rosidi identified a 'deficiency' in Pak Sjaf's public profile: he had not produced a major written work. In the early 1980s, Prawiranegara was actively involved in face-to-face preaching, yet Rosidi wanted to make Prawiranegara into a figure who had *written* a monumental work on Islam in contemporary Indonesia. In one of his letters to Prawiranegara, he gives the veteran politician some extraordinary advice:

...up to now all your writings have been like pamphlets, and now is the time to write a major work that will be a legacy for the generations to come after you... It is important that all your thoughts and ideas should be brought together, and not remain lying here and there for eternity...you could produce a treatise like those written by Mazzini or Gandhi. For that reason, I would strongly approve if you would stop all your organisational activities, and concentrate your attention on putting into writing the essence of your activities up to the present, which in my opinion would have greater benefit than the organisational activities in which you are currently engaged... (vol. 4, 144)

That letter was written in 1981. Prawiranegara was evidently not interested in creating the legacy anticipated by Rosidi, yet by 1986, Rosidi had not only produced the biography, he had also produced and edited two volumes of

the collected writings of Prawiranegara, as well as a volume of tributes and reflections.

A second reason to distinguish Rosidi from the main current of Islamic politics and culture in West Java emerges in the brokerage work mentioned above. These letters reveal Rosidi as an intellectual reluctant to remain within the confines of any single intellectual formation. In a number of letters he unequivocally presents himself as a supporter of the Islamic solidarity that is so important to Sundanese politics and cultural production, and during the tense years leading up to 1965, although he was friendly with writers affiliated with Lekra, he advocated strongly against the PKI through the magazine *Majalah Sunda*. Nevertheless, he has been a dedicated and enthusiastic public supporter of writers commonly associated with leftism, such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) and Utuy Tatang Sontani (1920-1979). And further, his own reading interests reveal a varied and even radical palate: in a letter in which he provides advice about publishing choices to the publisher I. Martalogawa (Penerbit Grimukti Pusaka), he recommends that Grimukti publish translations of works by and about Alvin Toffler and Noam Chomsky (vol. 4, 59). He recommends to the poet and editor Dodong Djiwapradja that he read Georg Lukacs, George Steiner, Roland Barthes, Jonathan Culler and Roman Ingarden (vol. 4, 90). The addressees of the letters published here belong to many different circles and networks, and Rosidi is unique for his ability to communicate in the language and symbolic repertoires of all of them.

Rosidi continues to publish prolifically in (at least) two currents. In one of these currents, he produces works about Sundanese genres, giving service to the Sundanese nation. The other consists of his own writings. As Henri Chambert-Loir has noted recently in this journal (*Archipel* 97), he is currently publishing his diaries in six-month blocs, a project anticipated to require forty volumes. These volumes will add to the thousands of pages of correspondence and recollections already published by this great scholar and intellect. These two currents are reflections of his two great preoccupations – the preservation of the Sundanese patrimony, and the continuation of his own public project of self-expression.

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